



EarthWatch Rhode Island



Topic: Managing Rhode Island Forests to Protect Wildlife Habitat

Air Date: April 11, 2008; Location: Merriman Demonstration Woodlot, Foster, Rhode Island

Rhode Island forests provide habitat to a large variety of wildlife species. While forests cover 59 percent of Rhode Island, wildlife biologists are finding that forest fragmentation is having a detrimental effect on many bird species and other wildlife. For instance, twelve of sixteen shrubland birds and seven of ten grassland birds have declining population trends in the region. Many are listed as threatened or endangered in several northeastern states. Additionally, American woodcock have declined by 40% over the past 30 years, ruffed grouse have largely disappeared from southern New England, and New England cottontails occur in only 20% of the area that this species was historically found.

The problem is that most of the states 393,000 acres of forest are owned by an estimated 26,700 private individuals who own 50 acres or less. These small tracts of land have become fragmented by roads, homebuilding and other developments which have disrupted wildlife corridors. In addition, forest landowners with small amount of forest land are less likely to manage their property for wildlife habitat protection.

DEM, working with numerous partners, has offered landowner assistance programs for many years to help Rhode Island landowners preserve their land and protect wildlife habitats in an effort to sustain forests and prevent further fragmentation.

Rhode Islands Coverts Project

The **Rhode Island Coverts Project** is the latest program to help landowners. Covert (*pronounced cover with "t"*) is a word that describes a thicket that provides shelter cover for wildlife. The goal of the Project is to teach individual woodland owners how sound forest management practices can make wildlife healthier, more diverse, and more abundant through improved wildlife habitats. Actively managed demonstration areas are used as outdoor classrooms.



The New England Cottontail is one species that would benefit from a tree and shrub covert.

A well-designed covert will provide food sources, nesting sites, and protection from snow, ice, and predators. One example of a covert is a tree and shrub thicket that provides shelter for wildlife such as quail, rabbits, pheasants, turkeys and songbirds. A tree and shrub covert can be established through natural regeneration, enhancing existing thickets, or

designing and planting a thicket from scratch on open ground. Snags (standing or fallen dead trees) are another example of a covert that can benefit wildlife. Snags provide nesting or den sites as well as insects as a source of food for wildlife such as birds. Cavity nesting birds that reduce insect and rodent populations and provide color and song, need snags to thrive.

The **Rhode Island Coverts Project** is currently looking for woodland owners and other interested individuals who want to learn more about their forests and the wildlife that live in them in exchange for a commitment to share that knowledge with others in their community. The inaugural **Rhode Island Coverts Cooperator Class** will be held at URI's W. Alton Jones Whispering Pine Conference Center, **April 18-20, 2008**.

Up to twenty woodland owners will be chosen to participate in the two and one-half day workshop that focuses on forest ecology and stewardship, wildlife management and land conservation. The training consists of both indoor and field sessions, as well as informal time to learn from fellow participants. In addition, each participant is given materials to take home. The seminar including meals, lodging, and reference materials is only \$100. In exchange, participants agree to share what they've learned with others and to become part of a state-wide coverts cooperator network.

Anyone interested in participating, or who would like more information, should contact Paul Boisvert, Rhode Island Coverts Project Coordinator, at the RI RC&D Area Council, 60 Quaker Lane, Suite 45, Warwick, RI 02886. Telephone: 401-568-1610 or email sneforest@sneforest.necoxmail.com.

The Coverts Project was originally developed jointly by Cooperative Extension Systems in Connecticut and Vermont and the Ruffed Grouse Society in 1983. Since then it has expanded to twelve other states across the northeastern US, now including Rhode Island.

The **Rhode Island Coverts Project** is sponsored by the Rhode Island Resource Conservation & Development Area (RIRC&D), the University of Rhode Island - Department of Natural Resources Science (URI), the RI Chapter of the Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS), the RI Department of Environmental Management Division's of Fish and Wildlife (DFW), and Forest Environment (DFE), USDA-NRCS, and the RI Forest Conservators Organization (RIFCO).

Interviews:

- Cathy Sparks, Chief, DEM Division of Forestry provided an overview of Rhode Island forests and how fragmentation is occurring
- Kathleen Giorgi, Biologist, USDA/Natural Resources Conservation Service, provided an overview of how fragmentation is affecting wildlife
- Chris Modisette, Resource Conservation & Development Coordinator, USDA/Natural Resources Conservation Service explained covert techniques at the demonstration site and provided details on registering for the Rhode Island Coverts Cooperators Class